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No. 1

THE BEST METHOD OF BRINGING
CO-OPERATION WITHIN THE
REACH OF THE POOREST OF THE
POPULATION.

A PAPER

READ BY MR. SIDNEY WEBB, LL.B., OF LONDON,

AT THE

Congress held at Lincoln, Whitsuntide, 1891.

ISSUED BY THE

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THE BEST METHOD OF BRINGING CO-OPERATION WITHIN
THE REACH OF THE POOREST OF THE POPULATION.

A PAPER BY MR. SIDNEY WEBB, READ AT LINCOLN CONGRESS.

"The Destruction of the Poor is their Poverty."

(1) WHO ARE CO-OPERATORS.

Co-operators are justly proud to think that their million members are, as a whole, of more than average intelligence and prosperity. In many a flourishing town in the north of England it might almost be assumed with certainty that the thrifty man and the temperate man, the superior artisan and the honoured leader of local life, belong to the ranks of the co-operators. They furnish, too, the best audiences for University Extension lectures, the keenest politicians, the warmest trade unionists. Whatsoever men are strong, whatsoever men are wise, whatsoever men are good, need, as a rule, no pressing to join the co-operative movement. And it is natural that it should be so. Co-operators know by hard experience how much energy and patience, how much thrift and prudence, how much self-control and good fellowship go to make up a successful society. The 1,359 stores, the twelve millions of capital, the thirty-five millions of sales, have been built up only by the social virtues of co-operators, and are limited by these.

Co-operators rightly feel the responsibility that their prosperity casts upon them. They are always seeking to spread the light which they have found. The zealous holders of the co-operative faith aim not more at profit than at propaganda, and they have their reward. A growing store is nearly always a flourishing store. If we seek first to increase our members and their custom, all other things are apt to be added unto us.

(2) WHO ARE NOT CO-OPERATORS.

But there are still sad blanks on the co-operative map. The rural districts of Scotland and the South of England are well nigh

varren of co-operative activity; the disorganised mass of workers in that great province called London respond but feebly to our exhortations; in the Black Country, in Liverpool, in Wales (not to mention Ireland), there is little co-operative life and much co-operative apathy. And even in a co-operative district the store is not patronised by the inhabitants of the slums. The victims of the sweaters' dens at Glasgow and Leeds are not store members. To-night in London some 30,000 of our fellow-citizens have no better home than the common lodging-house or the casual ward; probably not one of them is a member of the Tower Hamlets, Battersea, or Chelsea Store.

Four years ago, when the Queen on her Jubilee passed in review nearly the whole population of the Metropolis, she may have reflected that for one in every five of the inhabitants of the richest city in the world a pauper's death was waiting.* Few out of that fifth will ever have enjoyed the advantages of co-operation, or, indeed, will even have heard the co-operative gospel. In short, if we could see what the co-operative map cannot show, if we could contrast the social condition of co-operators and non-co-operators of to-day, we should find the sad fact that those among the wage-earners who need the advantages of co-operation least have got of it the most, and those who need it most avail themselves of it least. This is the co-operators' side of the great social problem: How can we best render General Booth's scheme unnecessary by bringing the "submerged tenth" into our own ranks?

But it is not alone with a "submerged tenth" that the co-operator has to struggle. For him there is at least a "submerged five-sixths." It seems probable that in spite of the steady growth of the movement, at least five out of every six families of the manual labour class in Great Britain still remain unaffected by it.

[3] AN AGGRESSIVE PROPAGANDA.

A large part of the "submerged five-sixths" might perhaps be reached by a mere increase in our present propagandist activity. There is no man so diligent in spreading the co-operative faith that he could not, by taking thought, add a little to the effect of

* The authorities for these statistics will be found in Fabian Tract No. "Facts for Socialists." (The Fabian Society, 276, Strand, London; price penny.)

his work. There is no society which has exhausted all the known methods of co-operative advertising. Our educational committees are apt to go to sleep, and to wake up spasmodically only once or twice a quarter. We take the trouble to send an annual deputation to the Trade Union Congress, but much more good would result from each store diligently cultivating the friendship of the neighbouring branch meetings of trade unions. The friendly societies offer a field as yet not systematically tilled. We are not persistent with the working men's clubs and local benefit societies. "Mothers' meetings" are held without the advantages of the store being brought to their notice by a member of the Women's Guild. Indeed, we do not yet make half enough use of the churches and chapels as fields for propaganda. Every kind of organisation can be made a recruiting ground for the nearest co-operative society, if this business of spreading the light were earnestly and persistently organised. Wherever two or three members of the wage-earning class are gathered together, some kind of co-operative missionary, even if only in the shape of a few leaflets, ought to be in the midst of them.

It would almost seem desirable that every co-operative society should have a standing "propaganda committee," whose function it should be to devise means of repeatedly making known the advantages of the store to all the local organisations around it. Letters and deputations could be sent to them, leaflets supplied for their members, speakers sent to their gatherings, lecturers offered for their public meetings. The Co-operative Union might publish a brief manual for the use of these propaganda committees, containing detailed suggestions for their action.

Many societies forget, too, that the lecture hall and the reading room are to the co-operative store what keeping the local post-office is to an enterprising tradesman. It makes people notice the shop, and gets them into the habit of coming there. "Advertising is to business what steam is to machinery; the great motive power." This is true of the co-operative as of every other movement. Every year a million new men and women reach the age of twenty-one. Why should not some notice of co-operation be inserted in our school reading books? Something of the kind might be prepared by the Co-operative Union. But until we can teach co-operation in the schools, we must bring it to their notice in every other way. Advertising can therefore never become unnecessary; its benefits are never exhausted, because its field is being perpetually renewed.

Complaints are made that lectures and classes on co-operation are apt to fall flat, and to fail to collect an audience. This is because we are usually preaching to the converted. Would it not be better, instead of nearly always holding these lectures and classes on our own premises, if we more diligently promoted the holding of lectures on co-operation in other organisations? Some good work is being done in this way by the Women's Guild, the Guild of Co-operators, and by one or two other bodies. But no single centre can by itself reach more than a few organisations, or promote more than a limited number of lectures. If the Co-operative Union were to get together the names and addresses of fifty or one hundred persons all over the country, who are able and willing to speak intelligently on co-operation; if this lecture list were supplied to all the 1,400 societies for free distribution; if 1,400 propaganda committees circulated it diligently once a year to all organisations in their neighbourhood, under whose auspices a lecture could be delivered, it might soon be found that instead of having to force the lectures on unwilling audiences, there was actually a greater demand for speakers on co-operation than could easily be met. And these lectures would be effective, because they would be delivered mostly to the unconverted.*

* Special classes need special means of propaganda. We cannot convey to all men by any uniform effort the good news of the power of democratic organisation. (a) The agricultural labourers. That it is not impossible for even the down-trodden farm labourer to form successful co-operative societies is shown by various flourishing instances. But co-operation does not, as a rule, spread in purely rural districts. These are just the spots which our ordinary methods of propaganda fail to affect. It is difficult to get meetings, and printed matter is either not read or not understood. The same difficulty has been found by the political organisations. The National Liberal Federation, the Home Rule Union, and the English Land Restoration League have done successful work by means of a travelling van, which carries around the country side store of literature, specially adapted to the rural mind, with an intelligent exponent, and which serves as the nucleus of meetings addressed by speakers from more enlightened localities. Would it be possible to equip a "Co-operative Van," and start it on a missionary tour round the agricultural districts of Great Britain? When it was in Gloucestershire no doubt the Gloucester Society could find a speaker or two to tell the labourers how well that had succeeded. In Oxfordshire the members of the successful Banbury Society could add practical testimony to the teachings of friends from Oxford University. Halesdend would work Essex; Cambridge, Manchester, London, would help in their respective localities; and in this way some good seed might be sown. (b) The Welsh. Why are the Welsh coal miners scarcely touched by the co-operative movement which is so strong among those of Durham? Why are the Welsh quarrymen, who successfully combine in their work, in their religion, and in their music, indisposed to combine for the distribution of the articles they consume? It appears worth consideration whether some special missionary effort should not be made, through the medium of the Welsh language, to reach these classes.

(4) THE ADAPTATION OF CO-OPERATION TO THE POOR.

But however energetically the machinery of propaganda is worked, we know from sad experience that comparatively few of the most destitute class will avail themselves of its advantages. The store fails to "catch on" among them, and succumbs after a brief struggle to their indifference. If co-operation is to be made common in the agricultural villages and the small rural towns, it must come in the shape of something more attractive than a new shop which gives no credit even in the cruelest winter.

What the village wants is not so much a new shop as a club—not so much a means of saving money as an opportunity for social life. Working men's clubs flourish in some places where co-operative stores languish.* It might be worth trying the experiment of reversing the usual order, and seeing if the store would not develop out of the reading room, rather than expect the reading room to grow out of the store. If the men in any village could be got to combine for the inexpensive maintenance of a club room, where, free from patronage or control, they could smoke and read the papers, this might lead the way to the common purchase of supplies, and turn our old friend Mr. Dent into our most influential missionary.†

Even where the store has come into existence first, it is worth considering whether it would not pay to make it more attractive than at present to the man who is not yet a convert to the co-operative faith.‡

But much more might be done to make the co-operative society attractive to the poor. The store might easily become the centre of associated life in the town. No one years at all times to save

* As in the poorer quarters of London.

† Here the new attempt to organise the farm labourers into a trade union could be advantageously utilised. The village clubroom might start as the local centre of the trade union. A conference with Tom Mann and Ben Tillett on this point could hardly fail to be of use.

‡ Perhaps it would be well if, with far-sighted generosity, and following the unthoughtful practice of some large societies, the use of the co-operative libraries and reading-rooms were avowedly thrown open free even to non-members. After all, it is the non-member whom we want to see attracted to the premises; he is not likely to visit them habitually without feeling some kind of curiosity about the society. We allow non-members the privilege of dealing at our stores; we admit them freely to our lectures and not try the experiment of attracting them by our libraries and reading-rooms? What inducement, it might be asked, would they then have to become members? The same inducement as the rest of us, the desire to save, the wish to criticise the management, the willingness to take part in the work, the subtle sympathy of fellowship—all that unconscious sense of solidarity which makes up the effective "handwork" of a successful store.

money or to improve his mind. What the ordinary man is usually seeking is social recreation. At present he too often discovers it in betting or at the beerhouse, from sheer lack of anything else. If he is energetic he finds the country or the small town too dull for him, and moves to London. What the store might be to him is eloquently suggested in a recent lecture by our secretary, Mr. J. C. Gray.*

After condemning the fragmentary and somewhat arid nature of the present educational work, he pleads for a wider sense of the social duties of the co-operative society. "Most societies," says he, "have halls or assembly rooms; where none exist rooms might be rented for the purpose. These halls are generally dark and closed for most nights of the week, except some enterprising entertainer makes his appearance and is willing to risk the expense of hiring in the hope of getting a profitable audience. Why not have such places open every night of the week, making them the 'drawing room,' entertaining room, clubroom (or term it what you like), of your members? Let it be known that the members would be heartily welcomed there every evening they choose to come. Let the invitation include both men and women, with their families as well if they cared to bring them. Having got them there, the next thing is to find instruction and recreation. These would have to be varied according to circumstances. There should be conversation, recreation, and smoking rooms for men and youths; gymnasiums for boys and girls, and for the women a room where they could have a good talk amongst themselves, and carry on any manner of instruction they wished."

Mr. Gray paints this glowing picture for its own sake; but would not its realisation be likely to do much to attract to our ranks just the class who have not yet enough faith, not yet enough thrift, not yet enough persistence of character to become members merely of a new kind of shop. Once bring them within our ranks, and they will learn more serious reasons for remaining there. The accession of members would probably do much to make up any temporary falling off in the dividend, which might have at first resulted from the new policy.

But when all this is done, the store cannot, and ought not to compete with the little shop in pandering to the demoralised commercial habits of the poorer population. To give credit, to supply worthless articles, to make up improvident "penn'orths" of tea,

* *Co-operative News*, January 10th, 1891.

to keep open Sundays and week days, and for unduly long hours, to pay low wages to assistants—all this would be to enter into a "struggle for existence," in which the fittest to survive would not be the best but the worst of the competitors. If we cannot without such methods bring co-operation within the reach of the poorest of the population, we must raise the poorest of the population within reach of co-operation.

(5) THE ADAPTATION OF THE POOR TO CO-OPERATION.

Do what we may to render the co-operative society attractive even to the poor man, there will still remain a large body of persons incapable of taking advantage of its benefits. Miss Beatrice Potter points out, in her admirable book on the co-operative movement, that the persons amongst whom co-operation does not spread are marked off from the rest not so much by their poverty as by their incapacity for democratic self-government. In some cases, as with the agricultural labourers, this incapacity is the result merely of ignorance and want of training. In others it arises from the indeterminate nature of the constituency. Sailors cannot take an effective share in the administration of any organisation owing to their constant absences. Gypsies and travelling tinkers are never likely to become effective members of a co-operative society. Unfortunately this instability of residence is not confined to particular industries. The demoralised "submerged tenth" seldom abides long in one place. Many of the London poor change their lodgings every few months. Half the population of Bethnal Green migrates within a year. The ghastly thirty thousand who crowd London's 995 common lodging-houses change perpetually from one to another.

Along with this residential instability may be classed the industrial instability which is a mark of the less evolved industries. The cotton operative of Lancashire often works in one mill his whole life long. The "greener" in the Whitechapel sweating den is there to-day and gone to-morrow. The chain-worker in the black country passes from forge to forge as the whim takes her. Instability is the characteristic of the hand industry in its survival alongside of more developed trades. With such shifting atoms of human sand no firm co-operative foundation can be built.

These demoralised classes can be brought within the benefit of co-operation only by being made fit for its higher life. "There is no fear," said John Stuart Mill, "that co-operation will spread

faster than co-operators improve. It is not an easy thing. If it had been, people would not have waited until this period for it." Nor are we without guidance as to how that improvement must be brought about. Not until the Factory Acts and the supremacy of the machine industry had given to the Lancashire operative a protected and disciplined life did co-operation succeed there. Not until a similar protection has been extended to the victims of the sweater's den, and the chain and nail forge, will these be able to become effective co-operators. Instability of residence may, perhaps, be largely checked by improved dwellings. The slum has no binding attractions; one alley is as good as another. Co-operation failed even in Yorkshire until the reformed municipalities began seriously to get to work. Make it possible to have what is really a "home," and fitting becomes a dread. The Glasgow Town Council with its municipal common lodging houses; the Corporation of the City of London with its artisans' dwellings; Manchester with its cheap municipal gas laid on to the poor, are all striving to adapt for co-operation classes now unfit for its advantages.* If by appropriate Factory Acts we could raise the sweated London worker to the level of the Oldham spinner; if by municipal enterprise we could give the Liverpool docker as good a home as the Dewsbury artisan; if by the supercession of the "garret master" by the large factory, the Black Country became industrially as well organised as Rochdale, there is no reason to doubt that co-operation would flourish in London, Liverpool, and the Black Country, as well as it does now in Oldham, Dewsbury, and Rochdale. As we cannot make co-operation fit our residuum, we must make our residuum fit co-operation. The compulsory elevation by municipal co-operation of the most degraded classes of our great cities appears to be a necessary preliminary to their further elevation by the voluntary association of the co-operative store.

The most useful pioneer of the extension of co-operation to the slums is the co-operator who is diligently seeking, as a town councillor or municipal voter, to abolish the slums. Better sanitation, municipal artisans' dwellings, public supply of water and gas, free public libraries, reading rooms, and museums—all this development of municipal activity is a form of co-operative propaganda. Not only the members individually, but the

* An account of these municipal developments will be found in the *Financial Reform Almanack* for 1891; or in the present writer's "Socialism in England" (London: Sonnenschein. Price, 2s. 6d.).

societies themselves in their corporate capacity might well assist in the utmost possible extension of this municipal co-operation as the best means of extending to the masses the benefits of the store. It seems time that the co-operative societies began to take their rightful part in municipal and parliamentary elections.

And a similar argument applies to the rural districts. When the inability to use the store—the incapacity for democratic self-government—arises mainly from lack of training in public life, we must begin by supplying that training. It may be predicted that the extension of local self-government to the villages by the creation of parish councils, will do more to make co-operation possible in the country side than any amount of lecturing.

We are thus enabled to see more clearly the important principle underlying the pregnant words of Messrs. Arthur Acland, M.P., and Benjamin Jones, in their "Working Men Co-operators." "It seems pretty certain," say these prophets, "that co-operators will be compelled, sooner or later, through the steady working of a gradual process of enlightenment, to take an active part in social politics, that is, in those so-called political matters which are directly and immediately concerned with the moral and physical well-being of the masses of the people."

It appears, indeed, as if the hour for this predicted leavening of politics by the co-operative faith were now come. The time is ripe for a great extension of municipal activity, a wide diffusion of local self-government, a great development of the collective protection of our less capable fellow citizens.

Co-operators are now rightly coming to insist that the advantages of their movement must and shall be extended to the very poorest of their fellow-citizens. But out of a sow's ear can no silk purse be made. It is hopeless to seek to spread co-operation in the slums as they now are. We know from the experience of the Lancashire and Yorkshire towns that every development of municipal activity will be accompanied by an increase in co-operative activity; every hour's additional leisure resulting from a new Factory Act by an additional store membership; every rise in the standard of comfort by a rise in the amount of co-operative sales. It seems probable that the most profitable co-operative propaganda at the present time would be those very "social politics" recommended by Messrs. Acland and Jones. The only effectual method of bringing co-operation within the reach of the poorest of the population is so to raise their condition as to make them fit to join its ranks.

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